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Burn Baby Burn

by Cyndy Muscatel

I don't remember whose idea it was—Sunny's or mine. One of us decided we should have a drama festival for our ninth-grade English classes. It doesn't sound like a big deal today, but in 1968, it was completely crazy. America was in terrible conflict—the fabric of the country in tatters. Assassinations were commonplace. Nonviolent and violent demonstrations for civil rights and against the Vietnam War spread through college campuses and spilled into the community at large. “Burn, baby, burn!” wasn't just a slogan, as we all learned to our jeopardy.

It was almost impossible to teach anything at Meany Junior High at that time. We were located in the Central Area—Seattle's inner city. Kids came from every ethnic and economic group, but the school was becoming increasingly African-American. So many were poor and underprivileged. My colleague Sunny and I were twenty-two—barely out of school ourselves. We were blue-eyed optimists filled with energy and ideas of how to ignite

our students' love of learning. We were passionate about what we did—we knew that education could be the ticket out of the ghetto.

It was tough-going. Sometimes, you'd give yourself a high-five if a few students wrote their names at the top left side of the paper. At first, we used the same curriculum that I'd had as a student there six years before, including Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, a complicated play with so many characters whose names began with C—Caesar, Casca, Calpurnia. If it had been *Romeo and Juliet*, maybe we could have sparked some interest in these teenagers, but all I saw were blank stares as I plowed through the lessons.

It wasn't that my students weren't well-acquainted with the concept of dramatic



arc. Every day, they were involved in some drama. At Meany, we had to keep our doors locked in case the Black Panthers, Black Student Union, Students for a Democratic Society, or any other protestors that wanted to hijack our classrooms. Our classes were disrupted several times a day by fire drills, making it impossible to build any momentum in the classroom. It drove me crazy, and one day, I'd had enough. I marched into the principal's office after the third drill to complain.

"How are we supposed to teach anything, Dr. Patterson?" I asked. "And why are you making us walk across the street for each drill? It's pouring down rain." I'm sure my hands were on my hips.

Dr. Patterson gave me a sardonic look. "Because bombs burst out," he said.

I remember his smile when my angry expression turned to shocked fear as I registered the fact that each fire drill was actually a bomb threat. I mumbled something like, "Oh," and turned to leave.

"Also," he said to my back, "I'd walk in the center of the hallway if I were you. Lockers make the best hiding places for bombs."

I could hear him laughing even after I left the office and made my way carefully down the center of the hall.

Dr. Roland Patterson, who came from the East Coast, was the first African-American principal in the Seattle Public Schools. He was a short man who I thought had a Napoleon complex. Not only was he autocratic, he didn't take well to criticism. But he did humor Sunny and me, going along with many of our ideas. In contrast, several of the old guard viewed us with derision. One ex-marine, who'd taught there when I'd been a student, snorted every time I walked into the teachers' room. I half expected him to ask for my hall pass. While Sunny and I worked to engage the kids' interest, he ruled his classroom as if he were still a drill sergeant. I thought of myself as my students' coach, not their adversary. I'm not saying I wasn't tough if I had to be—I've been told that my look from across the room could freeze recalcitrant students in their tracks.

Still, I was glad that the week before the drama festival, Obie Tate chose to hold Steve Wilson's class at gunpoint instead of mine. Obie was a recent transfer (that was what the schools did—transfer a troublemaker anywhere out of their school). Mr. Wilson was a big guy—nothing much seemed to bother him. Obie, after holding the gun to several students' heads, had stood down. I don't think I would have had Steve's calmness to defuse the situation as he'd done.

It was in this anarchical milieu that Sunny and I decided to have the drama festival. For several weeks the kids rehearsed and gathered props and costumes. Meanwhile, we decided to invite important people in the community to be the judges. One was Fitzgerald Redd Beaver. He was the editor of *The Facts*, an African-American weekly. A large man, his facial expression was a permanent scowl—at least, it was when he looked at me. He didn't like "whiteys" teaching in the black community, and he wasn't shy about announcing it to the world. One of his kids was in my class, and at Back-to-School Night, Mr. Beaver glared at me throughout

my presentation.

"Why do you think you can teach in this school? You're white," he said afterward. "You can't possibly relate to my son or any of the other African-Americans. You know nothing."

I wanted to say I'd been involved in the civil rights movement for years. I wanted to explain that I'd grown up with black kids and had known them all my life. I knew our experience was very different, but I felt I could make a difference now. Being Jewish, I'd also known the sting of prejudice. I wanted to explain that we were trying to create change within the system—that we



cared and wanted to right wrongs. I wanted to say I was changing the curriculum to include African-American authors like James Baldwin, Richard Wright, and Langston Hughes. I wanted to say that being Caucasian didn't mean I couldn't teach everybody of every color. I started to say, "I'm here because this is what I know how to do—it's what I can

do to help," but he cut me off. How we had the guts to ask him to judge the drama festival, I don't know.

The other judge was Roberta Byrd Barr. I had seen her at the Cirque Playhouse when she starred in *A Raisin in the Sun* with actor Greg Morris. She became principal of Lincoln High School in 1973, the first woman principal of a high school in Seattle. She was an outstanding woman, a busy and multitalented person who generously agreed to "judge" this tiny endeavor. We felt honored.

The day of the drama festival I woke to sunshine. A *good omen*, I thought. I drove my husband to work because the car was filled with props. "I know it will be great," he said as he got out.

"I hope so," I said. "The kids deserve it." We were all tired, all burdened by the assassinations, by the civil rights struggle, by the Vietnam War and the protests. I loved that the kids were getting to just be kids having fun, if only for an afternoon.

My first period was ninth-grade English—almost everyone was participating, which was an amazing feat in itself. Students broke up into groups and rehearsed for the final time. I felt so encouraged to see their focus and also the camaraderie-building between the kids, no matter their race. *We can do it*, I thought.

We met in the auditorium right after lunch. We'd gotten permission from the other teachers to let participating students leave their classes for one period. The kids were excited about rehearsing their scenes, wearing their costumes and makeup, and being on stage. You could feel it—the energy, the joy. As for Sunny and me, we had the feeling that we were actually doing something constructive. Learning was taking place—amazing!

Mr. Beaver was late, and I remember pacing back and forth, getting more agitated with each passing minute. *Should we start without him?* I wondered. *Would that make him angry?* We only had an hour and a half to get all the acts in. Ms. Byrd had been early. She'd smiled and given my hand a squeeze when she came in. Just her presence gave me confidence.

Mr. Beaver walked in just as I was about to start. He was surly and didn't offer an excuse. Only when he saw Roberta Byrd and sat down beside her did his sneer lessen, but not by much.

We began with a condensed version of the 1943 radio play *Sorry, Wrong Number*. Certainly it was an old play, but it still had a punch. And it had the advantage of being in the textbook. The kids stood with mikes as if in a recording studio and read their lines from the "script" they held. The audience loved it and so did the actors. You could feel the excitement. It was contagious. I stole a look at Mr. Beaver—even he looked entertained.

Next, came the scene from *A Raisin in the Sun*. This required scenery and costumes. It was in the middle of this act that Dr. Patterson came in. My first thought was that he was going to sit in on the judging after all.

Instead, he came up to me, frowning. "You'll have to leave the auditorium," he said in an undertone.

"What? We're right in the middle of the drama festival." I shook my head. "No, we can't leave. We're doing something wonderful here!"

"The school is on fire," he said in a slow staccato. "We need to evacuate."

"Fire?" I said. I was terrified of fire. Three years earlier, I'd walked past someone's room in the sorority house and seen the curtains on fire behind her. I'd screamed something incoherent and then run down the hall to the fire alarm. I had to break the cover to set it off, and it seemed like hours before I'd been able to. I still had nightmares about the flames licking around Jackie's head. I dreamed that we didn't get out safely, and it was my fault.

Now, I turned quickly to the kids. I had to make sure they were safe. "Everyone, we need to exit the building. Please follow Dr. Patterson out the rear door," I said.

"What? Why do we have to leave now?" one of the boys asked.

"Yeah, we were just getting to my part," a girl said.

"I know. And I'm sorry. But the school is on fire," I said, my voice shaky. I'd begun to smell smoke.

It was important to get the kids safe. We led them outside and across the street to where other students were already gathered. We all stood watching the smoke rise from the west wing of the building. I noticed some of the African-American kids had white cloths in their hands. At lunch, one of my seventh-graders had come up to me to ask if I'd wetted my cloth yet. I didn't attach any significance to it at that time, but now I realize that this fire was no accident. It had been well planned.

I'm not sure how long it took, but the fire department succeeded in putting out the fire. Eventually we returned to the building. There was chaos, of course, with the smell of smoke and fear hanging in the air. School was dismissed immediately for the day. I didn't see Ms. Barr or Mr. Beaver—they must have left immediately. I met Sunny in the auditorium, where the props and scripts lay abandoned.

Sunny looked close to tears. "Let's take a walk around the school," I said, trying not to cry myself. "Maybe the fresh air will clear our minds."

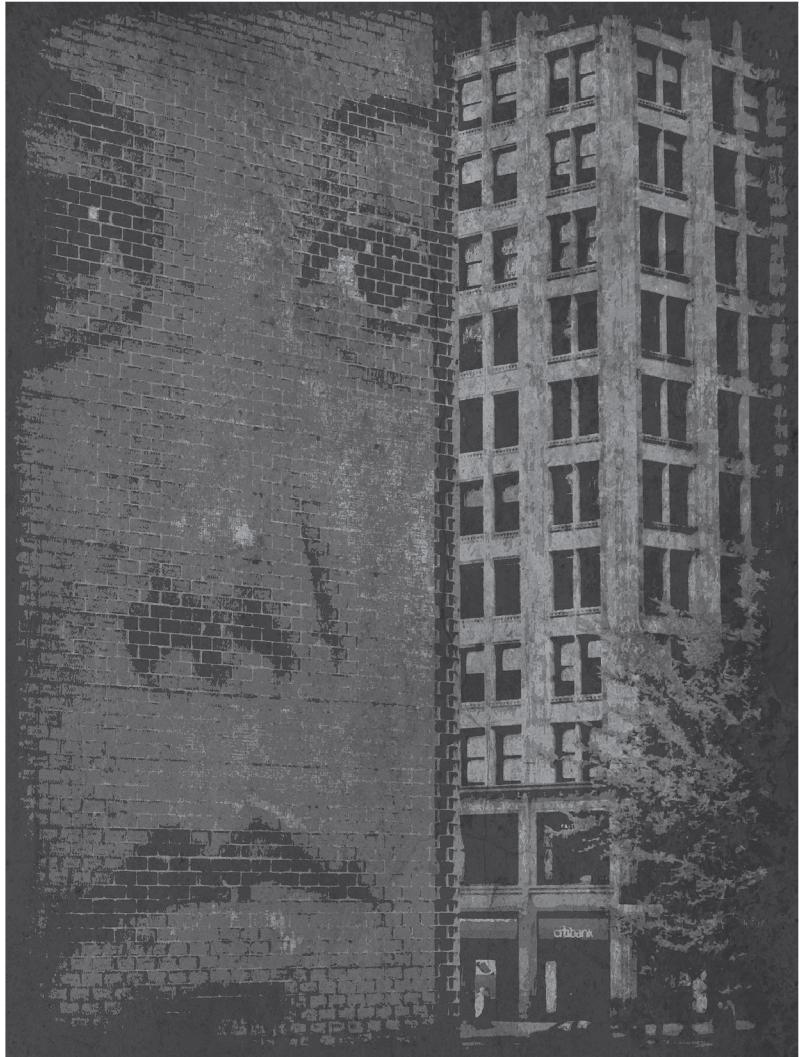
It was a warm day, so we didn't need jackets as we headed out. We walked side by side without talking. When we rounded the corner on 19th, we saw a big group of kids coming toward us. As they got closer,

we realized they were throwing rocks at the school. The sound of broken glass filled the air.

Sunny and I looked at each other. "Oh, shit," I said. Here we were, these two very white women, and approaching us fast was an angry mob.

"What should we do?" Sunny asked. We didn't have time to consider options, which turned out to be okay because we were wrong about the group—the kids weren't angry at all. They were just having fun.

When they saw us, they called out, "Hi, Mrs. Anderson. Hi, Mrs. Muscatel." They stopped



throwing rocks as they came closer, smiling and waving. I smiled and gave the occasional wave as they continued through us. A half a block away, they started lobbing rocks at windows again.

In those days in the Central Area, if the fire department was called out, the Seattle Police Department's riot squad came too. Sunny and I had just breathed sighs of relief after surviving the rock throwers, when we looked up and saw the police marching up the street toward us. I've never been so frightened in my life. They were in full riot gear, their pink faces very piglike in the afternoon sunshine. I could feel their menace from three blocks away.

"We better get the hell out of here," I said to Sunny.

We quickly turned onto school property and headed for the double doors. I felt we made it inside just in time. I have no doubt that the police would have grabbed us and maybe even roughed us up. We'd probably have been arrested before we could say who we were.

Sunny and I went to the teachers' room where many of the teachers had gathered, some angry and some in shock. No one talked—almost everyone smoked. After a while, we were told it was safe to go to the parking lot for our cars. In my mind's eye, I saw the rock throwers and the riot squad and wondered who I was safer from.

"Let's go to my house," I said to Sunny.

It was a short drive to my studio apartment. I turned on the radio as soon as we'd started the car, wanting to hear if they were reporting the fire. There was nothing.

At the apartment, even though it was 3:00 in the afternoon and neither of us was a big drinker, I made us gin and tonics. Our nerves were shot.

We took our drinks and sat on the couch. "We almost did it," Sunny said after a few minutes. She had red hair and fair skin that freckled and flushed easily. Now she was deathly pale.

"The kids were loving it," I said. Sunny nodded. "I know. You could see how excited they were."

"It was the most positive thing I've seen for a long time," I said. "Now I don't know what will happen. School's almost over for the year." I leaned my head back on the couch. "I am so tired," I said.

We continued to talk about our confusion and despair until it was time to pick up my husband. He and I took Sunny back to school for her car.

In the spring twilight, the school sat as if untouched. You couldn't see that the windows were broken or that something had broken inside of us.

